DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 248 FL 016 220

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TITLE Language Awareness in a Child Development Course--A Case Study.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 8p.; In: Donmall, B. G., Ed. Language Awareness. National Congress on Languages in Education Assembly (4th, York, England, July 1984). NCLE Papers and Reports 6; see FL 016 215.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Child Development; *Child Language; Course Objectives; Curriculum Development; *Field Experience Programs; Foreign Countries; *Language Acquisition; *Language Role; Linguistics; Practicum Supervision; Secondary Education; *Secondary School Curriculum; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Great Britain; *Language Awareness

ABSTRACT

A course in child development offered at a British secondary school focused on language development. The primary objective was to sharpen college students' awareness of the language development of children they meet in their everyday lives and children they study during the course. The teacher's role is to extract linguistic theory from the observations made by students and to encourage students to try out language strategies with young children in different situations. The course topics included: the miracle of language development; developmental ages and stages; talk in everyday situations; language and play; the language of control; rhymes, songs, and stories; reading and books; television and young children; and the wider implications of the topics studied. Problems encountered or addressed in the course planning and implementation include sex-stereotyping of the caretaker role, sensitive areas in the teacher-student relationship such as low-achieving students, student misunderstandings of the course's objectives, and the adequate training of teaching personnel. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN A CHILD DEVELOPMENT COURSE - A CASE STUDY

P. J. Downes

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LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN A CHILD DEVELOPMENT COURSE - A CASE STUDY

P J Downes

Introduction

Teachers of Child Development courses, which mainly appear on the timetable as 4th/5th Year options, have an excellent opportunity to develop language awareness with specific reference to first language acquisition. Most teachers of this course come from a background of Home Economics training so it is not surprising that the traditional emphasis in such courses has been on the physical development of babies, their dietary needs, their clothing, their play and toys. Many of the text-books used as a basis for these courses give only a passing reference to language development but it is pleasing to note that some more recent examination papers have included specific questions on aspects of child language, with special reference to social context.

Many Home Economics trained teachers of Child Development are anxious on two counts: a. they are afraid that teaching about language development as such may divorce it, in the pupils' minds, from the overall family context; b. they are uneasy about the abstract nature of the ideas and the complicated vocabulary used by specialists in linguistics. It is, however, possible to devise a short course which focuses specifically on language development and which could be incorporated in a two-year course as, say, a 12 week module, preferably early in the two-year cycle, with the possibility of a little follow-up work later.

In such a course, the main aim would not be to pass on theoretical knowledge of the nature of child language even though some transmission of factual information may be necessary from time to time. The primary aim would be to sharpen pupils' awareness of language development in the young children they meet in their everyday lives and in particular in relation to the specific individuals they are studying as part of their course. The teacher would seek to draw out the main strands of linguistic theory from the observations made and would then encourage pupils to try out language strategies in their contact with young children, whether in playgroups, at infant schools, as big sister/brother or as baby-sitter.

The Course

The following is an outline of a course tried out by Paul Baker (Banbury Teachers' Centre) and Peter Downes when the latter was Head of Linguistic Studies at Banbury School. With modifications, the

same course has been tried out subsequently with pupils at Henry Box School, Witney and at Hinchingbrooke School, Huntingdon. The academic level has varied from non-exam pupils to O level candidates and the length of the 'module' from 6 weeks to a term.

The main 'headings' for the work are:

a. The miracle of language. The aim here is to create a sense of wonder and amazement at the baby's achievement in learning to talk and communicate in such a relatively short time. Comparisons and constrasts are made with how the young of other species develop communication without speech and the uniqueness of the human being is brought out.

b. Ages and stages. The main developmental stages in language are explained, principally by reference to tapes and videos, as well as by direct observation of children known to members of the class. Care is taken to ensure that variations from the 'norm' are not allowed to be cause for anxiety but hints can already be made about the effect of the parental and adult context in which the baby is reared.

c. Talk in everyday situations. The point is made that babies are learning every day and all day (contrast learning of foreign language) and that all routine experiences of everyday life form the structure in which they learn to communicate. By means of observation and role play, it is possible to sow the seed of the idea that the way parents 'use' everyday events as language material can have an effect on the way children learn to talk.

d. Language and play. Much of the baby/toddler's day is spent 'playing' so the effect of the different kinds of play is looked at: imaginative play, dressing-up, playing with toys, using everyday objects, adventure games, construction toys, jig-saws etc. By watching how parents talk to children as they play with them, the class can begin to see what aspects of language are being developed by the various activities undertaken. Pupils working with playgroups set out to try out specific strategies with their charges.

e. The language of control. By looking at transcripts of recordings made in shops and in the street, and by adding their own observations, the class looks at the way language is used to bring about acceptable social behaviour. The 'conditioning process' not only produces a behavioural response but also creates a way of looking at the world.

f. Rhymes, songs and stories. By recalling their own childhood songs and rhymes and by listening to others commonly used, the pupils try to come to an understanding of the contribution made by rhythm and intonation in the developing speech of the young child. It is possible for them to discover that words are in themselves a source

of pleasure and entertainment and this leads on to discussion of what we mean by a sense of humour and its close links with linguistic mastery. Pupils prepare for themselves stories to be told to young children and then report back on their success.

g. Reading and books. By bringing in to school a wide selection of books used by pre-school children, it is possible to study the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to pre-reading for young children. The point is made that if children associate enjoyment with books from a very early age, long before they can actually read, they are more likely to be well-disposed towards reading and book-based learning in future.

h. Television and young children. This has become an increasingly important part of the course over recent years as the impact of television and television-based entertainment has intensified. The positive and negative aspects are looked at and pupils try the experiment of watching a programme with a toddler and then trying to 'exploit' the content in play.

i. The wider implications. Depending on the maturity of the group and the relationship between the teacher and the pupils, it is sometimes possible to draw out some or all of the wider implications of the studies undertaken: that all children other than the severely handicapped do learn to understand and talk but the speed and effectiveness of the learning process is directly affected by the adults surrounding the child; that the time that parents have to give to their young, with its social and financial implications, is a crucial element; that family size and paternal role are more important than commonly assumed; that later attitudes and progress in school are dependent on what has happened before the child comes officially within the education net of 5 - 16; and so on.

Teaching method

Most of the above topics can be dealt with actively and practically and this is much more effective than a more didactic, information-giving approach, even when the watching of television programmes on child development is included. The use by the pupils of tape-recorders with subsequent transcription of baby utterances was found to be far too difficult and ultimately counter-productive. A great deal of guidance was needed to train pupils in listening for specific aspects of language e.g. on visits to playgroups.

Problems

1. Sex-stereotyping. In all the schools in which this course has been tried out, the membership of the teaching group was entirely female. There is a danger that this reinforces the view that the job of bringing up children is solely that of the mother,

whereas, in a number of aspects of the course outlined above the distinctive and important role of the father is emphasised.

It can be argued that the rearing of children is too important to be sex-stereotyped in this way and an alternative approach is to include language awareness in a social studies course taught to both sexes or in a parentcraft course, taught as part of a number of core courses to 4/5th Year pupils.

2. Teacher-pupil relationships. On a number of issues, the relationship between teacher and pupil touches on sensitive areas. There could, for example, be an implication that a low-achieving pupil, possibly one taking mainly non-exam subjects, is in this situation because of a linguistic deficiency which can be attributed to parental neglect or ignorance. Some of the points referred to in (1) above could be the source of ill-feeling and resentment if handled insensitively.

3. Social class implications. A common misunderstanding in the early lessons of this course has been that 'teachers want to make us all talk posh'. This serves to remind anybody thinking of trying out such a course that the material must start from what the pupils observe of the world around and not imply the imposition of a superior model of language.

4. Teaching personnel. In the courses referred to, the teaching has been led by a teacher who was not a member of the Home Economics department, i.e. either an English specialist or a modern linguist with a special interest in linguistics. In discussion at conferences for Home Economics teachers where this course has been presented, there has been frequent reference by Home Economics teachers to their self-confessed inadequacy to teach this aspect of a Child Development course. Reassurance that there is a relatively low level of specialist knowledge required has not been easily accepted and it would appear that, if this course were to develop more widely, there would be a need for in-service training for Home Economics teachers, supported by specially produced materials and teaching notes. Where a specialist teacher can be imported from another department, assuming timetable logistics make it possible, there can be an uneasiness of relationship and, more dangerously, an implication that language can somehow be divorced from the rest of child development.

Conclusion.

In spite of the difficulties referred to, I remain convinced that there is an important role for language awareness to play in the later years of secondary schooling, quite apart from the other examples shown in other case-studies in this report. Ideally, I would like to see it as part of a wider policy for increased public

awareness of the essential role of parents in the early years of their children's lives. Such a policy would need support from the health authorities, from social services and from the education service at all levels; it will not come about as long as these different departments of care and provision remain in isolation from each other and particularly as long as the Local Education Authority, coming under increasing financial pressure, restricts its oversight to the so-called compulsory period of schooling from 5 - 16. Those who have had much experience in dealing with slow-learning and demotivated children are often heard to say that what has happened to the child in his social and linguistic environment before he enters the official period of schooling is the most decisive factor of all in his education and, arguably, in his whole life.

Select bibliography

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